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## She reads, he reads: gender differences and learning through self-help books

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### Abstract

*Despite considerable scholarly attention given to self-help literature, there has been a lack of research about the experience of self-help reading. In this article, we explore gender differences in self-help reading. We argue that men and women read self-help books for different reasons and with different levels of engagement, and that they experience different outcomes from reading. We provide evidence from in-depth interviews with 89 women and 45 men. Women are more likely to seek out books of their own volition, to engage in learning strategies beyond reading, and to take action as a result of reading. Men are more likely to read books relating to careers, while women are more likely to read books about interpersonal relationships. We argue that these gender differences reflect profound political-economic and cultural changes, and that such changes also help explain the gendered evolution of adult, continuing, and higher education in recent decades.*

**Keywords:** gender differences; popular culture; self-help reading; informal adult education

### Introduction

Reading self-help books has become a significant part of popular culture in many countries. Influential sociologists have linked self-help literature to important trends, including the increasing ‘reflexivity’ of identity formation (Giddens, 1991) and the deployment of ‘psychotherapeutic technologies’ in the governance of citizens (Rose, 1999). Authors, publishers, and scholars have long recognized that self-help reading is a highly gendered activity, with books, marketing campaigns, and research focused primarily upon women. Remarkably, despite the participation of millions of men and

women each year, there has not been significant empirical research on gender differences in self-help reading.

The analysis of gender differences in self-help reading is connected to core concerns of adult educators. Empirical research on gender differences is integral to the study of primary and secondary schooling, and of post-secondary education. Such research has revealed how gender structures the experience of students in school systems, and how the experience of schooling (re)produces gendered identities and divisions of labour. Reading self-help books is a form of ‘public pedagogy’ (McLean, 2013, 2014; Sandlin, O’Malley, & Burdick, 2011; Sandlin, Schultz, & Burdick, 2010; Wright & Sandlin, 2009), through which adults access resources from popular culture and learn without the involvement of educational institutions. Past studies of adult learning through related forms of popular culture have included those focused on women’s experiences (Jarvis, 1999; Kapell & McLean, 2015; Wright, 2007), but gender differences in informal adult education have not been subject to empirical research in a manner parallel to work done in the context of schools and post-secondary institutions.

In this article, we explore gender differences in self-help reading. We argue that men and women read self-help books for different reasons and with different levels of engagement, and that they come away from their reading with different outcomes. We support this argument with evidence collected through qualitative interviews undertaken with 89 female and 45 male readers of self-help books in the fields of health and well-being, career and financial success, and interpersonal relationships. We conclude that gender differences in self-help reading reflect profound political-economic and cultural changes, and that such changes also help explain the gendered evolution of adult, continuing, and higher education in recent decades.

## **Literature review and theoretical framework**

Given the commercial success and social influence of self-help books, scholars and members of the health and human service professions have created a substantial secondary literature in this field. Members of health and human service professions have assessed the use of self-help literature in the context of therapeutic and clinical practice (Coleman & Nickleberry, 2009; Ogles, Craig, & Lambert, 1991). Literary and cultural critics have interpreted the structure and meaning of self-help texts, and related the popularity of self-help reading to broader social changes (Cheng, 2008; Cherry, 2008; Cullen, 2009; Woodstock, 2007). Studies exist of the historical evolution of self-help reading (Biggart, 1983; Effing, 2009), and of the contributions of such reading to contemporary forms of governance that rely on internal forms of self-regulation (Hazleden, 2003; Philip, 2009; Redden, 2002; Rimke, 2000).

Given the gendered nature of self-help readership, many analyses of self-help books have been influenced by feminist perspectives. Simonds (1992), Leavitt (2002), and Ehrenreich & English (2005) have authored manuscripts focused on self-help books for women. Hazleden (2004, 2009), Grodin (1991) and Hochschild (1994, 2003) have produced insightful analyses of the implications of self-help reading for women’s lives. Zimmerman and various colleagues have published feminist analyses of self-help texts pertaining to parenting and family relations (Krafchick et al., 2005; Zimmerman, Holm, & Haddock, 2001). While substantially more focus has been given to women as self-help readers, some studies have been published regarding books directed to male audiences (Bloch, 2000; Courtney, 2009).

Despite considerable scholarly and professional attention given to self-help literature, there has been a remarkable absence of empirical research about both the overall experience of self-help reading, and gender differences in that experience. Overall, researchers have tended to be speculative rather than empirical when it comes to describing the impacts of self-help reading on readers: few studies have been published that assess learning processes and outcomes among those who read self-help literature. Existing studies tend to interpret the meaning of self-help books, and then impute the supposed impact of those books on those who read them. There are some exceptions to this pattern; existing works that have undertaken original research with actual readers of self-help literature include Barker, 2002; Bruneau, Bubenzer, & McGlothlin, 2010; Gabriel & Forest, 2004; Grodin, 1991; Knudson, 2013; Lichterman, 1992; Ogles, Craig, & Lambert, 1991; Scholz & Forest, 1997; and Simonds, 1992.

When it comes to exploring gender differences, the gap between theoretical interest and research involving self-help readers is even wider. Of the nine works identified above as having undertaken direct research with self-help readers, five were conducted exclusively with female participants (Barker, 2002; Bruneau, Bubenzer, & McGlothlin, 2010; Grodin, 1991; Scholz & Forest, 1997; and Simonds, 1992).

Of the four publications we found which involved both female and male research subjects, only one systematically assessed gender differences. Lichterman (1992, p. 438) interviewed six men and nine women, but simply concluded: 'Men as well as women read self-help psychology books. It is beyond the scope of this article to propose systematic differences between female and male readings'. Knudson (2013) interviewed 21 women and 15 men, and found differences between 'habitual' and 'targeted' readers of self-help books. Ogles, Craig & Lambert implemented an experimental design with 48 women and 16 men to explore the contributions of self-help reading to psychological coping with 'divorce or breakup', but made no observations about gender differences. Gabriel & Forest (2004) published the only article we found that reported gender differences in the experience of self-help reading based on empirical research. However, the 15 men and 14 women in this study were undergraduate students in a first-year psychology course rather than actual readers of self-help books, and the study merely reported that there was 'no statistically significant evidence for sex differences' (p. 662) in participating students' responses on an assignment to 'highlight important information' (p. 657) from a 30-page excerpt from a self-help book.

Our literature review reveals considerable scholarly and professional interest in self-help reading as a gendered component of popular culture, but little empirical research about gender differences among readers. In the next section of this article, we explain the methods we used to bridge the gap between deconstructing the gendered implications of self-help texts and understanding gendered experiences of self-help reading. First, however, we develop a theoretical framework that enables both the interpretation of our findings, and an understanding of why our research with self-help readers is important to those interested in other forms of adult, continuing, and higher education.

Between the 1950s and the 1990s, there were profound and interrelated shifts in the engagement of women in paid employment and formal education; understanding those shifts is integral to interpreting gender differences in self-help reading. The first shift was the increasing proportion of women participating in wage labour markets. In Canada, where most of our interviewees lived, the proportion of women engaged in wage labour increased from 24% to 60% between 1951 and 1991 (Canada, Dominion Bureau of Statistics, 1951; Statistics Canada, 2005). The increasing participation of

women in wage labour has profoundly influenced adult, continuing, and higher education in recent decades. Once again, data from Canada illustrate the dramatic nature of these changes. In 1950, women made up just 22% of university undergraduates in Canada (Statistics Canada, 1983). This proportion increased to 50% by 1987, and to 58% by the year 2000 (AUCC, 2011). The aspirations of women to develop their knowledge and skills, and the need for women to obtain credentials to compete in the labour market, have also helped drive an enormous expansion of continuing professional education programs. Women now constitute a significant majority of students in all major university continuing education units across Canada (McLean and Carter, 2013).

The rapid growth of women's participation in wage labour and higher education has not been accompanied by corresponding decreases in women's engagement in domestic responsibilities such as childrearing and housekeeping. Hochschild (1989) used the term 'the second shift' to describe the increasing tendency for women to work outside of the home while also dedicating substantial time to domestic labour. She estimated that in the 1970s, women in North America and Western Europe worked an average of 15 hours per week more than men, when both paid and domestic labour were taken into consideration. Other scholars subsequently affirmed the empirical reality of a gender imbalance in total time spent in paid and domestic labour in places such as Australia (Craig, 2006), Canada (Arai, 2000), and the United States (Milkie, Raley, and Bianchi, 2009; Osnowitz, 2005).

Hochschild (2012) also argued that women have retained disproportionate responsibility for 'emotional work' both in the paid marketplace and at home. She explained why women have disproportionate responsibility for the management of emotions and relationships: 'The reason, at bottom, is the fact that women in general have far less independent access to money, power, authority, or status in society' (p. 163). Hochschild's assertion about the financial disadvantages faced by women is reflected in the persistence of gender-based income inequality; in 2008 in Canada, the average hourly wage for women was 83% of that for men, while the average annual salary of female, full-time and full-year workers was just 72% of that of males (Drolet, 2011).

The increasing participation of women in paid employment and higher education, coupled with a persistent gender gap in wages and disproportionate responsibility for domestic labour and emotional work, provides important context for the interpretation of gender differences in the experience of self-help reading. Women pursue self-help reading more, and more intensively, than men because women must compete on an unequal playing field for wage-employment, while also maintaining disproportionate responsibility for domestic labour and the maintenance of interpersonal relationships. Such challenges provide ample motivation for women to read self-help books, and for women to outnumber men in a wide range of other adult, continuing, and higher education contexts.

## Research methods and participants

In 2012, we conducted interviews with 134 adults who had read a self-help book, in the areas of career success, interpersonal relationships, or health and well-being, over the course of the previous year. Interviewees were recruited primarily through online advertisements placed in the 'books' sections of Kijiji websites for Calgary, Vancouver, Edmonton, and Winnipeg. Most participants were Canadian, although 14 were

American and three were British. Since our interest was to explore the experience of, and learning outcomes associated with, reading self-help books, rather than to test particular hypotheses, we did not engage in systematic or random sampling procedures. Therefore, our interviewees do not represent the full range of readers of self-help books, and we do not employ inferential statistics in this article.

Qualitative interviews were conducted via online chat software, telephone calls, and the exchange of e-mail messages. The interviews focused on the experience of reading a specific self-help book, and were organized in five main sections: motivation; learning goals; learning strategies; learning outcomes; and impact. Questions were open-ended, encouraging participants to share their experience of self-help reading in their own words and with minimal direction. Interviews were transcribed verbatim or cut and pasted from chat software or e-mail messages. Participants completing interviews received a \$25 honorarium (about 16 British Pounds).

Overall, two-thirds of our participants were female. Since our sampling procedures were not systematic, we cannot claim that this statistic reflects overall self-help readership patterns. The fact that twice as many women as men participated in our research could reflect actual differences in readership, but it could also reflect gender differences in the level of stigma associated with self-help reading, the attractiveness of our recruitment messages, and the level of utilization of Kijiji in shopping for books. While we cannot infer that our data reflect gender differences in readership among the broader population, we can use our data to explore some fascinating gender differences in learning experiences in a domain where previous research has largely focused on women.

Female participants in our study were, on average, older than male participants, and had higher levels of formal educational attainment. The mean age of our female participants was 34 years, while the mean age of our male participants was 30 years. The most significant difference was in the participation of readers over the age of 40: 29% of women and only 11% of men in our study were between the ages of 40 and 65. Once again, it is uncertain whether this reflects the actual scarcity of older male readers of self-help books, or other factors. With regards to educational attainment, 67% of women and 53% of men in our research had completed at least an undergraduate diploma or degree.

Participants to our study earned a living through a wide range of activities. Gender differences were most pronounced in rates of unemployment and engagement in homemaking responsibilities. No men identified 'homemaker' as their primary occupation, while 20% of them cited being currently unemployed. For women, 17% were homemakers, and just 7% were unemployed. The most common field of paid employment for women was in the domain of education, health, and social or government services. A total of 26 women (29%) were employed as schoolteachers, post-secondary instructors, health care workers, social workers, and government service workers. Just 6 men (13%) were employed in this sector, in jobs ranging from schoolteacher and police officer to chiropractor. The most common fields of employment for men were in the domains of technical, sales, and service. A total of 16 men (36%) were employed in jobs such as information technology analysts or developers, sales representatives, and welders. A total of 14 women (16%) were employed in this sector, in jobs ranging from flight attendant and customer service representative, to writer and landscaper. Similar proportions of men (13%) and women (15%) were employed in positions responsible for the management and administration of businesses. In short, participants to our research were engaged in a broad range of

productive activities, with gender differences in those activities reflecting well-documented patterns.

## Findings

We found that the experience of reading self-help books was fundamentally different for men and women. We found important gender differences in why people read self-help books, how they read them, and what they learn from them.

### *Why do people read self-help books?*

There are many reasons for reading self-help books, but such reasons may be organized into two categories. Some people read self-help books in response to experiences or transitions which they are trying to understand, overcome, or address. Just over half (71) of our participants engaged in self-help reading to deal with changes that they had experienced in their careers, their health, or their relationships. Just under half (63) of our participants had other reasons for reading – some were addressing a chronic issue or concern in their life, others held an intellectual or general interest in the subject matter of the book, and others received the book as a gift, or through attending a workshop. Table 1 reveals substantial gender differences in the proportion of men and women whose self-help reading was directly linked to a change they had experienced.

*Table 1: Gender and motivation to read*

Catalyst	Women		Men	
	Number	%	Number	%
Career	9	10%	6	13%
Health	24	27%	8	18%
Relationship	19	22%	5	11%
None	37	42%	26	58%
<b>Total</b>	89	100%	45	100%

Gender differences were slight when it came to the proportion of men and women who turned to self-help books as a result of career-related transitions. In explaining their motivation to read, men made statements such as ‘I was working for a year, then unfortunately myself and a few colleagues were laid off a few weeks ago’ (Jed); ‘I’ve been a business owner since October 2011 and so I am often reading business-related material’ (James); and ‘When I was reading this book I just started a new career and was hoping that this book would give me advice and provide some useful tools I could bring to the workplace’ (Sachin). Women used very similar language, as the following examples demonstrate: ‘I had just started a new job and was feeling a bit anxious about how to make a good impression and learn my new duties quickly and effectively’ (Hailey); ‘I just began substitute teaching and felt really nervous and unprepared going into it. I thought it would be good to read from an experienced guest teacher’ (Kim); and ‘I have just finished my PhD and am looking for a job so I have quite a lot of spare time on my hands’ (Julie).

A somewhat greater proportion of women than men identified health-related experiences as a catalyst for self-help reading. The eight men who did so reported both physical and mental health concerns, as in the following examples: 'I joined the weight loser competition from work before I read this book' (Graham); 'When I read the book I was very depressed, and suffered from a great deal of anxiety, my life was not in very good shape to say the least' (Clive); and 'I was in treatment for an eating disorder for some time and part of my treatment was to read this book' (Gabriel). Women likewise reported both physical and mental health concerns: 'My car accident was 2.5 years ago now. I fractured my skull in the accident, and now have post-concussive syndrome' (Robin); 'I was feeling depressed and stuck in my life and felt like if I understood myself and could make myself better, I would be happier' (Gillian); and 'I have been struggling with peri-menopause, with wild swings in hormones' (Wendy). Despite a greater proportion of women citing health-related experiences as catalyzing their self-help reading, and despite women reporting a somewhat broader range of health concerns, gender differences were slight when it comes to motivations for reading self-help books pertaining to health and well-being.

It was in the domain of interpersonal relationships that men and women differed fundamentally in their motivations. Proportionally, twice as many women as men cited relationship experiences or concerns as key to their self-help reading. Further, women reported a much greater range of relationship issues as having motivated their reading. Of the five men who described relationship issues, three had recently broken up with their girlfriends, one had a son diagnosed with diabetes, and one was struggling to parent a highly active and emotional child. In contrast, women read self-help books due to: the dissolution of an intimate relationship (four participants); divorce (two participants); a recent or forthcoming marriage (three participants); conflict with friends or family members (two participants); a child diagnosed with a psychological disorder (two participants); the start of a new, intimate relationship; difficulties in an intimate relationship; the death of a spouse; an infant's sleeping problems; having an extra-marital affair; and the loss of a sense of community in a church group. In short, women were more likely to read a self-help book due to changes in their relationships, and they reported concerns with a broader variety of relationship issues.

Men were more likely than women to read a self-help book for reasons unrelated to a specific experience or transition in life. Illustrations of such motivations among men include: 'My friend told me to read it.' (Mathew); 'It was required reading for a course I was taking through work' (Evan); and 'I like reading books that are both entertaining and informative' (Samuel). Parallel illustrations from female readers include: 'My relationship with my mother has always been what I would call "strained". She is very controlling and always gets her way' (Melia); 'My husband had finished reading it and said I would benefit from it' (Sioban); and 'After smoking for 23 years, I knew that I was getting ready to quit. I bought the book. I didn't actually read it for five months' (Elisha). In summary, both men and women read self-help books for a variety of reasons, but women are more likely to read due to experiences or changes relating to health or relationships, while men are more likely to read due to a general interest or unsolicited recommendations.

The tendency for women to be more proactive or purposeful in their self-help reading was also reflected in the responses we received to the question of how participants selected the self-help books that they discussed with us. Men (53%) were more likely than women (42%) to rely upon recommendations from friends, family members, or co-workers, while women (35%) were more likely than men (22%) to find self-help books through browsing online or at a bookstore or library. About one-quarter of both men



and women selected books due to recommendations from health care practitioners or workshop leaders, prior reading from the same author, or the general fame of the author or the book.

Men and women both read self-help books for a variety of reasons. Women are substantially more likely to read due to concerns regarding interpersonal relationships, and somewhat more likely to read due to health concerns. Men are somewhat more likely to read due to career concerns, and substantially more likely to read for reasons unrelated to specific changes or experiences in their lives. Women are also more likely to be proactive and purposeful in selecting self-help books. This finding is amplified in the subsequent section, which demonstrates that women read self-help books in a more highly-engaged and linear manner.

#### *How do people read self-help books?*

Women and men differed in their degree of engagement with, and likelihood to take action from, self-help books. A total of 91% of female participants, and 84% of male participants, completed reading the entire self-help book which they discussed with us. In terms of the learning strategies employed to engage with the content of the book, women were more likely than men to take notes or highlight the text (49% to 38%), keep a learning journal or undertake exercises as suggested by the author (38% to 20%), and undertake follow-up activities such as reading additional books by the same author (13% to 9%). Men were equally likely to talk with friends or family members about their self-help reading (42%), slightly more likely than women to re-read the text more than once (33% to 28%), and more likely to employ no other learning strategy beyond the process of reading itself (18% to 12%). Finally, women were more likely than men to take concrete steps to implement advice provided by the authors of self-help books. Nearly two-thirds of female readers did so, while less than one-half of the men did so.

To describe the informal learning process associated with self-help reading, we developed a three-step model: define clear learning goals; identify salient learning outcomes; and take specific action in response to learning (McLean & Vermeylen, 2014; Vermeylen & McLean, 2014). As would be expected, there was attrition in the learning process at each of these steps: 93% of our participants were able to define specific learning goals which they claimed to possess at the outset of their reading; 83% indicated that they learned something of significance and identified opportunities to apply such learning to health, relationship, or career issues in their lives; and 61% were able to describe fairly concrete actions which they had undertaken in response to learning from their reading.

Based on the responses of our participants to questions about each of these three steps in the learning process, we constructed three basic pathways to summarize their experiences. First, the ‘linear’ learning pathway describes those readers who had one or more clearly-defined learning goals, learned something relevant during their reading, and took concrete action in their lives as a result of reading. Second, the ‘incomplete’ learning pathway describes those readers who had one or more clearly-defined learning goals, may have identified opportunities to apply lessons learned from reading to their lives, but did not take specific and concrete action based upon their reading. Third, the ‘incidental’ learning pathway describes those readers who either had no clear learning goal at the outset of their reading, or whose learning goals and eventual actions were not clearly linked with learning outcomes from the book they had read.

There were significant gender differences in the learning pathways experienced by participants to our research. Table 2 illustrates that women were more likely than men to be linear and successful self-help readers.

Table 2: Gender and learning pathways

Pathway	Women		Men	
	Number	%	Number	%
Linear and successful	58	65%	21	47%
Purposeful but incomplete	20	22%	14	31%
Incidental or random	11	12%	10	22%
<b>Total</b>	89	100%	45	100%

The most common learning pathway described by our participants was a linear process through which self-help readers addressed health-related issues. Janna, a thirty-four-year-old homemaker, spoke with us about her motivation for reading *The Dukan diet*, by Pierre Dukan:

Having struggled with weight loss, I was open to different ideas and methods. I was hoping to learn how to lose weight and maintain that weight loss. I was also hoping this would help with willpower and alternate cooking methods. In the weight loss process, I was hoping to gain insight as to what triggers overeating. Why, how and when I eat. I wanted to be able to control these factors in order to be successful. Losing weight to be able to keep up with my kids and minimize the risk of illness and disease (diabetes).

Janna summarized her key learning from the book: ‘I plan more and eat a healthier diet. I make better choices. Pre-planning menus and having food on hand were very important. Making sure I had allowable snacks’. She described the following concrete actions she undertook as a result of reading:

I had to be very organized and learn to pre-plan meals. I made daily and weekly lists. Eventually this also applied to the rest of my day and home-life. Pre-planning meals, menus and lists made the whole house run easier. Self-help books – regardless of their main ‘point’ offer an excellent opportunity to learn more about you. How you learn and communicate. Reading this book brought me to the Facebook page where I was able to develop friendships with other people and also learn about other methods of goal setting and accountability.

Other participants described linear learning pathways relating to: physical health issues (e.g., dietary practices, smoking cessation, exercise, and pre-natal health); emotional or mental health issues (e.g., stress, anxiety, depression, addictions, and moodiness); interpersonal relationships (e.g., intimate relationships, parent-child relationships and communication skills); and career or financial success (e.g., developing time management and goal-setting skills, charting a career path, and understanding the character traits of successful people).

While a majority of female participants to our study experienced linear and successful learning pathways, a majority of men had either incomplete or incidental experiences of learning. Chase, a twenty-three-year-old who is currently unemployed and has not attended university, described his learning goals in reading *Do what you are: Discover the perfect career for you through the secrets of personality type*, by Paul

Tieger: 'I didn't know what career path to take' and 'I wanted to change my ideas on college and university. I had this idea that college/university was for people going on to be doctors or whatever'. Chase had clear motivations for reading this book. However, he indicated that his learning did not translate into meaningful change and, in fact, he felt disengaged by the book to the point where he didn't even finish reading it:

I didn't really find out anything important or anything I didn't already know. I didn't finish reading the book because it couldn't hold my attention. I think that it was the content that couldn't hold my attention because it seemed to be repeating the same things over and over again. I didn't find the book helpful, so I didn't apply the strategies it suggested into my daily life.

In terms of taking concrete action resulting from reading, Chase indicated that he had such intentions ('I was hoping to learn how to distinguish the differences between hobbies and passions'), but he did not actually describe doing so.

While Chase's self-help reading pathway could be described as purposeful but incomplete, Louis' was incidental. Louis was a twenty-four year old sales representative who read *The Greatest Salesman in the World* by Og Mandino at the recommendation of his employer. He described not having explicit learning goals: 'I didn't really expect anything, just that it was the recommended reading material for my work. I was working in Toronto selling educational books door to door and this was the only book that I had to read'. Despite not having chosen to read the book himself, Louis enjoyed the book: 'It is just such a great book in which you can pull something from every time you read it'. He claimed that through reading this book, he learned the art 'of making positive habits and the ability to separate my emotions from my surrounding environment'. Twenty-one participants had incidental learning pathways. Some, like Louis, related narratives of being given books by friends, relatives, or employers, and experiencing learning and change despite an absence of pre-existing learning goals. Others related narratives of picking up self-help books out of a general interest in a subject matter, and then learning something either loosely related or unrelated to their initial interest.

In summary, the women in our research displayed a higher level of engagement with self-help books, and a greater likelihood of being linear and successful learners rather than incomplete or incidental learners. Predictably, then, there were also substantial gender differences in the types of learning accomplished by self-help readers.

#### *What do people learn from self-help books?*

Of our 134 participants, 49% read books relating primarily to health and well-being, while 26% read books dealing with interpersonal relationships, and 25% read books on topics relating to career and financial success. There were distinct gender differences in readership of different types of books. Women were more likely to read books pertaining to health and well-being (54%) and relationships (29%), as opposed to those pertaining to careers (17%). In contrast, men were more likely to read books pertaining to careers (40%) and health (40%), as opposed to those pertaining to relationships (20%).

In addition to reading books about different topics, men and women approached those books with different goals, and followed up their reading with different sorts of actions. Tables 3 and 4 illustrate the learning goals and outcomes of men and women who read career-related self-help books. Note that in this and subsequent tables, goals

are stated as direct quotations from interviewees, while outcomes are synopses drawn from interview transcripts.

*Table 3: Male self-help reading and careers*

Reader	Book	Goals	Outcomes
James 31 year old chiropractor	<i>The 4-hour work week</i> , by Timothy Ferriss	I wanted to learn how to separate myself from my business more. Because when I first bought my business I was here, like, all day, everyday.	Restructured a staffing model in his business, with receptionists empowered to make more decisions.
Ben 28 year old software developer	<i>Think and grow rich</i> , by Napoleon Hill	I was merely curious about the strategy that someone could employ to amass this amount of money.	Successfully requested a work assignment in a different city.
Darren 25 year old IT analyst	<i>The Secrets of success at work</i> , by Richard Hall	I wanted to see if there was something I could do to make myself a better job candidate and a better person overall.	Broke down large work assignments into smaller components, enabling more effective completion of projects.
Milo 29 year old unemployed	<i>How to get control of your time and your life</i> , by Alan Lakein	I was hoping to learn effective time management skills, in part so that I could learn how to waste less time and get the most out of the amount that I have.	Employed priority setting and time management techniques.
Evan 37 year old police officer	<i>Strengths finder 2.0</i> , by Tom Rath	To learn the value of determining my strengths as opposed to focusing on things I needed to learn to do better.	Focused on strengths and found co-workers with complementary strengths.

*Table 4: Female self-help reading and careers*

Reader	Book	Goals	Outcomes
Grace 52 year old recovery coach	<i>Live your life's purpose</i> , by Dorothy Ratusny	I guess what I thought that I would get out of it, would be confirmation of what my life's purpose is. Not from the book, but from what the book would lead me to do.	Entered a training program and established a new business, following being laid off from the public sector.
Delilah 24 year old restoration technician	<i>Fish!</i> , by Stephen Lunden, Harry Paul, and John Christensen	I don't think there was anything I was hoping to learn, just wanted to find a new perspective. I found I was a negative person and didn't enjoy my job and always looked at the negative side of things.	Implemented strategies to think more positively about work.
Laila 20 year old student	<i>The Secret</i> , by Rhonda Byrne	I really wanted to learn how to stay happy at all times in life and learn to live positively.	Decided on a career path, applied to business school, and was accepted.
Nelly 31 year old opera singer	<i>The Naked voice</i> , by W. Stephen Smith	Ideas and methods that would prove to be healthy, effective and efficient (for singing).	Practiced vocal exercises to improve her professional singing voice.
Kim 25 year old school-teacher	<i>Substitute teaching from A to Z</i> , by Barbara	I was hoping to learn ways to deal with classroom management when it's not your own class as well as some tips and tricks for	Implemented classroom management techniques (as a schoolteacher).

Pressman      getting students to respect, obey and listen to you.

Among participants in our study, men were more than twice as likely to report learning outcomes relating primarily to career and financial success. Further, as Tables 3 and 4 illustrate, women were more likely to express learning goals and report outcomes which linked career success with other goals, such as happiness and well-being.

Women and men read self-help books pertaining to health in similar proportions and with similar goals and outcomes. Tables 5 and 6 illustrate the learning goals and outcomes of men and women who read health-related self-help books.

*Table 5: Male self-help reading and health*

Reader	Book	Goals	Outcomes
Ryan 32 year old musician	<i>The four agreements</i> , by Don Miguel Ruiz	I was hoping to find some strength in myself. It kind of a cliché story, but I had my heart smashed open and I was having a tough time getting back to me.	Spoke with friends about the emotional pain he was feeling.
Clive 28 year old unemployed	<i>Stop saying you're fine</i> , by Mel Robbins	The main goals for me were to get back on track again, but specifically deal with anxiety and depression.	Started keeping a daily journal and feeling more positive.
Gabriel 25 year old loan officer	<i>Life without Ed</i> , by Jenni Schaefer	I was hoping to learn some key coping mechanisms in order to help me fight the eating disorder that I was struggling with.	Kept a daily journal and overcame an eating disorder.
Owen 31 year old IT analyst	<i>Man's search for meaning</i> , by Viktor Frankl	I was interested in how a person's spirit can find resiliency and be indefatigable.	Used internal dialogue with self (based on book's messages) when faced with sadness.
Graham 32 year old computer lab technician	<i>Healing foods</i> , by Amanda Ursell	The main goal was exploring the nutrition and health benefits of food and preventing cancers and other type of diseases.	Purchased and consumed healthier foods.

Table 6: Female self-help reading and health

Reader	Book	Goals	Outcomes
Melia 44 year old homemaker	<i>The mindful woman</i> , by Sue Patton Thoele	My hope in reading this book was to change negative thought patterns and to focus on being less judgmental and to help me ‘be more present in the moment’.	Practiced meditation.
Elisha 37 year old school-teacher	<i>Allen Carr’s easy way to stop smoking</i> , by Allen Carr	My goal was to stop smoking. I did not want to continue to damage my body.	Quit smoking.
Lauren 32 year old homemaker	<i>The perfect 10 diet</i> , by Michael Aziz	I was hoping to learn a little bit more about nutrition.	Changed family meal-time practices.
Kiera 20 year old student	<i>Thoughts and feelings</i> , by Matthew McKay et al.	I wanted to be able to control my mood, and through that be able to have a more constant and enjoyable life. I am often anxious, and I was hoping that through reading this book, I will be able to be less anxious and enjoy my time more.	Kept a ‘Thought and Evidence Journal’ to promote a more calm and rational approach to stressful situations.
Gracia 30 year old school-teacher	<i>Feeling good</i> , by David Burns	When I started to read the book my goals surrounded finding some relief from my anxiety and depression.	Implemented strategies to think more positively about stressful situations.
Wendy 48 year old unemployed	<i>Navigating midlife</i> , by Robyn Vickers-Willis	I was hoping to gain insights on how to cope with a raft of unsettling emotions, thoughts, and responses.	Took an ‘intensive journaling’ workshop.

Table 5 provides a virtually comprehensive picture of the men who reported health-related learning outcomes, with the exception of two men who claimed to have adopted a vegan diet as the result of self-help reading. In addition to those identified on Table 6, twenty-three other women reported health-related outcomes relating primarily to dietary changes, practicing meditation, and various stress management strategies. Apart from the larger range of learning goals and outcomes reported by women, there were only modest gender differences in health-related learning from self-help books.

Gender differences in self-help reading were most pronounced in the domain of interpersonal relationships. Table 7 identifies all five men who reported learning outcomes pertaining to relationships, and Table 8 presents data from five of the 22 women who reported such outcomes.

Table 7: Male self-help reading and relationships

Reader	Book	Goals	Outcomes
Justin 25 year old student	<i>How to change the life you have for the life you want</i> , by Amanda Ball	Problems with school courses, and inability to attain any meaningful relationships.	Became more assertive and positive in workplace relationships.
Nate 30 year old IT analyst	<i>The five love languages</i> ,	I was hoping to understand my wife a little better and get some insight into our	Changed patterns of conversation with spouse.

	by Gary Chapman	relationship.	
Fraser 27 year old student	<i>Always know what to say</i> , by Peter Murphy	I wanted to learn how to interact with people better. I was always a shy person and it was hard for me to engage someone in conversation about anything.	Took a deep breath prior to speaking with people.
Finn 25 year old graphic designer	<i>The Game: Penetrating the secret society of pick-up artists</i> , by Neil Strauss	Initially I just wanted to ascertain the validity of what the book claimed, rather than taking away an experience from it. Once I got into it though, I started to think more about improving self confidence, and if the book were to advise anything with regards to a personal healthy body image.	Used a ‘magic card trick’ to break the ice when meeting girls in bars.
Reg 43 year old welder	<i>Raising your spirited child</i> , by Mary Sheedy Kurcinka	I wanted to better associate with my child. Learn about how he thought and what I could do to develop a better relationship with him. How to diffuse my frustrations.	Tried to understand a child's behaviour, and act differently in response to that behaviour.

Table 8: Female self-help reading and relationships

Reader	Book	Goals	Outcomes
Nicole 47 year old flight attendant	<i>Will I ever be good enough?</i> by Karyl McBride	I think if anything was a goal, it was to find a way to free myself of feeling guilty about how I often feel about my mom, to validate how I feel, and to forgive the things about her that make me crazy.	Changed patterns of conversation with her mother.
Danica 45 year old unemployed	<i>When good people have affairs</i> , by Mira Kirshenbaum	I was hoping to understand what compelled me to be the kind of person that had an affair. I was hoping to learn how to decide what to do with my life from then on.	Ended an extra-marital affair.
Robin 37 year old health care educator	<i>The Ultimate guide to sex and disability</i> , by Mirium Kaufman et al.	Right on the cover it states that it's about sex and disability, and also covers chronic pain patients. I'm not sure that I had certain goals, but I was interested in both of these subjects.	Expanded range of sexual practices.
Rachel 36 year old urban planner	<i>The five love languages</i> , by Gary Chapman	I was hoping to learn what the love languages are, and which love languages myself and my husband use.	Changed patterns of conversation with spouse.
Sheila 24 year old real estate agent	<i>The New male sexuality</i> , by Bernie Zilbergeld	I was hoping to become more successful in my romantic relationships with men and better understand what drives them sexually.	Establish a new and ‘successful’ relationship with a boyfriend.

In addition to those identified on Table 8, seventeen other women reported relationship-focused outcomes relating primarily to their behaviours with husbands and boyfriends, and in situations of interpersonal conflict. The gender division of responsibility for intimate relationships implied by these results is striking. Of 45 men in our study, just one reported reading a self-help book with intentions and results focused primarily upon an intimate relationship; in contrast, 11 of 89 women reported goals and outcomes pertaining mainly to the enhancement of an intimate relationship.

## Conclusions

In this article, we have described two key gender differences in the experience of self-help reading. First, women's reading was focused significantly more upon the maintenance and enhancement of interpersonal relationships. In contrast, there were relatively modest gender differences in self-help reading pertaining to careers and health. Men were proportionally more likely to read self-help books relating to career and financial success, but there were only minor gender differences in learning goals and outcomes among readers in this sub-genre. It would seem that women have joined men as readers of career-related self-help books, and men and women have comparable interests in books about health and well-being. Strikingly, though, women were far more engaged in self-help reading designed to enhance intimate and family relationships. Second, women appear to be more proactive, purposeful, and linear in their reading of self-help books. Women's engagement with self-help books differs from men's in that they are more likely to seek out books of their own volition, to complete the reading of the book, to engage in learning strategies beyond simply reading, and to engage in concrete action as a result of reading.

Our empirical research with readers of self-help books has provided a rich description of gender differences in reading practices and outcomes. These findings have important implications, both for those interested in understanding gender issues in society, and for those interested in adult, continuing, and higher education. Our findings support the interpretation that Hochschild (1989, 2003, 2012) has made of the evolving role of women in paid and domestic labour. We argue that women read self-help books more frequently and more intensively than men for the same reasons that women have come to constitute the majority of students in adult, continuing, and higher education in recent decades: the increasing necessity to work for wages, coupled with persistent wage gaps and disproportionate responsibilities for domestic labour mean that women tend to work harder than men in order to obtain and maintain well-remunerated jobs. Being on the disadvantaged side of the wage gap makes self-help reading for career-related purposes just as important for women as it is for men. Bearing disproportionate responsibility for domestic labour and emotional work makes self-help reading oriented towards interpersonal relationships more important for women than for men. Women would seem to have more at stake in their engagement with self-help books, and thus be more proactive, purposeful, and linear in their reading.

Our observations about the differences between male and female readers of self-help books are of value to those engaged in more conventional forms of adult and continuing education. There are many contexts in post-compulsory schooling where women outnumber men. It is important to keep in mind that this imbalance does not exist simply because women like schooling more than men do, or because women had more positive prior experiences of schooling than men did. In many circumstances, women face a higher degree of compulsion to participate in adult and continuing education – whether as a strategy to earn more money or as a strategy to maintain relationships for which they feel a stronger sense of responsibility than do men. Self-help books oriented toward female readers have been particularly successful not because women are more gullible than men, or because they have more spare time; rather, such books have been successful because they address the concerns of women in the context of substantial political-economic and cultural change. It is not a coincidence that rates of participation in self-help reading, adult and continuing education, and higher education have all expanded dramatically over the past sixty years, nor is it a coincidence that women constitute the majority of learners in all these domains. Such



phenomena share common roots in the incorporation of women in wage labour markets, coupled with persistent gender imbalances in wages and domestic labour.

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